

Special edition: Accounts from Tanna, Vanuatu, after a tropical cyclone

It was just under a year ago that, on the occasion of Ridván 2014, the Universal House of Justice described the vibrant community-building process taking place in Tanna, Vanuatu—one of five communities designated to raise up a local House of Worship. In its message, the House of Justice illustrated the movement of this community; a movement that is “especially in evidence in those clusters where a local *Mashriqu’l-Adhkár* is to be established.”¹ Theirs is a story of transformation and hope in what is possible when a community shares a clear vision for a more just and united society. Regarding Tanna, the Universal House of Justice writes, “There is much here to indicate that, when the elements of the Plan’s framework for action are combined into a coherent whole, the impact on a population can be profound.”²

On 13 and 14 March 2015, a severe tropical cyclone swept across the island chain of Vanuatu. And Tanna—one of the islands in that chain—lay directly in the path of the storm. The damage was extensive, and communication throughout the island was cut off. In the wake of this crisis, when families have lost many of their material possessions, those affected by the storm are working together with great courage and determination to advance a process of reconstruction.

In close collaboration with their friends, neighbours, and both governmental and non-governmental organizations, members of the Bahá’í community in Tanna are eagerly contributing to many aspects of the work required, and the capacities they have developed over time through participation in the institute process and their application of Bahá’í teachings to the life of society are evident. A spirit of selfless service has characterized efforts to address the immediate material and spiritual needs of the community in the aftermath of the storm. Junior youth, youth, and adults are helping to rebuild homes, bring back to life damaged vegetable gardens, and take care of the elderly, extending every kindness and comfort they can to their neighbours. All the while, children’s classes and junior youth groups continue unabated. A profound trust in God and reliance on the power of prayer is manifest in the many gatherings for collective worship that have been held, both during the hours of the cyclone and in the weeks that have followed. As the storm was passing through, the believers would continue to wake at dawn to prepare for the day of fasting ahead. And just a few days later, Naw-Rúz was joyously celebrated with neighbours and friends. In the response of the community, we see the power latent in a process that enables thousands of people to come into contact with the Word of God and the Person of Bahá’u’lláh.

Though the House of Worship in Tanna has not yet been physically built, the spiritual conditions necessary for its construction have existed in the community since 2012, when the Universal House of Justice called for its establishment. In reflecting on the community’s experience, the words of the House of Justice in describing the institution of the House of Worship come to mind: “As the place from which spiritual forces are to radiate, the *Mashriqu’l-Adhkár* is the focal point for dependencies to be raised up for the well-being of humanity and is the expression of a common will and eagerness to serve.”³

This special edition of *Reflections on Growth* draws on accounts gathered by two believers from another region in the country who visited Tanna in the days after the cyclone moved through the island. We hope that these stories will inspire all the believers, young or old, to arise for the promotion of the Plan, fully assured that, in doing so, they are participating in the building of a divine civilization.

Nakayelo

On 25 March 2015, we arrived at Nakayelo village, on Tanna island, the village where the Training Centre is situated. We walked towards the village and the Training Centre from the main road. The road was so unrecognizable that we missed the road to the Training Centre. We finally met Mama Sapai from a distance—an elderly Bahá'í and one of the caretakers of the Training Centre—she dropped everything she was carrying, ran towards us, and embraced all of us with joy and tears in her eyes. She wanted to know how we were and was more concerned about us than herself. She led us to the village. All the houses in the entire village were razed to the ground. The Chief's house, Tom Wapin's house, his kitchen, Serah and Joseph's house, all were gone. There was no one to be found. They had all taken refuge in a nearby village. We walked around the village, and we could not find the children playing, the mothers chatting, cooking, and weaving their mats.



The damage in Nakayelo village

We then decided to go to the Training Centre. The road to the Centre was blocked by broken trees everywhere. Mama Sapai led us to the place, and it was another devastating scene. The Bahá'í Centre, in which many functions were held over the years, the dormitories, the kitchen, Mama Sapai's home, and the other caretaker's home were all razed to the ground. Nothing was spared. We collected some of the remaining solar power system, and Mama Sapai was able to find some of her things—a bucket, a few plates, and a tent. We returned to the village and pitched our tent to spend the night. We were all sad and were consoling each other not to be sad, but we all cried privately.



A young man lays out his institute books
in the sun to dry

In the morning we saw a Bahá'í youth approaching the village. He went to where his home once stood and started looking for something under the rubble. It seemed he was looking for something very important to him. He finally found a metal box that belonged to him. We were watching him from a distance and were wondering what was in the box. He opened it very carefully and took out an institute book that was soaked in water. He opened it and looked at it—it seemed he was remembering the time he studied that course. He laid it carefully under the sun to dry. He then took another institute book from the box and laid it under the sun, and then another. He then took out the youth conference booklet and did the same thing. He finally took out his prayer book. He opened it very

carefully to the picture of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and laid it under the sun with the utmost respect. He was very happy to see that some of the junior youth books under the box were not completely wet.

We went to another village where the people of Nakayelo had taken refuge during the cyclone. They had been there for over a week. One of the mothers by the name of Serah told us that her four-year-old son, Ramu, approached her the other day and asked her to teach him the rest of the quote, “Let your heart burn with loving kindness for all who may cross your path,” which he had memorized earlier. Serah taught him another part of the quotation. He went off playing and came back to his mother asking to be taught more. Serah told us that her son’s thirst for spiritual education was an awakening for her. She has now decided to return to her village immediately, build her house, and form her children’s classes again. We were also told that, soon after the cyclone, the Bahá’is organized a devotional meeting for all who have taken refuge in this village. We were told that this devotional meeting was truly a soothing experience for all.



Damage to the Bahá'í Training Centre in Nakayelo

Namasmene

From a married couple: During the cyclone many people realized that their life depends on the Will of God and not on the material things they have gathered around them. During the cyclone everyone turned their hearts to God and supplicated His blessings and protection, even those who never prayed.

We think now the junior youth projects will become more meaningful and more systematic, addressing the needs of the community. The junior youth will need to continue to think about agricultural and social projects to bring lasting change to our community.

As the winds were blowing, we read the prayer revealed by Bahá'u'lláh for calamities. This prayer reminded us that even though the cyclone is very powerful, God's power is far greater. As we repeated this prayer, our trust in God multiplied, and we knew that Bahá'u'lláh would protect our lives. It is true that the cyclone has damaged our homes, gardens, the coffee farms, the sandalwood plantations, our sources of income. But the cyclone helped us to realize that we should not be attached to the things of this world and to be mindful of our purpose in life.

Soon after the cyclone the youth began helping the elderly and the people in need. The junior youth and the graduates of the programme got together and began building shelters for the people. Some of these shelters were used for holding devotional meetings. For years we were planning to hold a devotional meeting in the village that would embrace all the people, but it was not possible—not everyone responded positively to our invitation. Now, after the cyclone, we were able to hold a devotional meeting in which everyone participated. This is one positive outcome of the cyclone. Before the cyclone, some of the members of our community were involved in land disputes. After, many of these people said that they had gone too far away from God, and now they realize that they have to forget their disputes. Now many people are focused on cooperation and harmony. This is another positive outcome of the cyclone.

Now our Local Spiritual Assembly will meet and lead the reconstruction process for the community to follow. We know that we should not depend on aid donors, but that we should take charge of our own development. For the reconstruction process, we will use the same tools and instruments that we used for the expansion and consolidation of our community. We will work in three-month cycles. We need to ensure that both the spiritual and material aspects of our lives advance during the reconstruction process. The animators will be holding their animator gathering, and the junior youth groups will hold their groups' meeting and begin their service projects. Their projects will encourage the community members to arise and take charge of the reconstruction process rather than waiting for an aid agency.



**Friends in Namassetene. Their kitchen is blown away,
so they prepare food and cook in the open.**

During the cyclone the junior youth who attended the programme were fully engaged in serving others and ensuring everyone's safety, especially the children and the elderly. The programme had raised their capacity to serve their community and to help others first before helping themselves. The junior youth have developed the capacity to see the real needs of the community and to act to address those needs.

Another thing the junior youth group did soon after the cyclone was to encourage and help the people go back to their gardens and start replanting what the cyclone had damaged, and to save the plants that were being damaged by the sun. The group would go to each family's garden in the morning and help them with replanting. This is to ensure that after three months they would have enough food to survive.

During the cyclone almost all of the houses in the village were blown away, and the people had to take refuge at a nearby vocational school. The youth and the junior youth helped to carry the children and the elderly to the school. While strong winds were blowing, we could clearly see the capacity of the junior youth who had gone through the programme. They demonstrated a spirit of selflessness in helping others, ensuring that all were safe. When they brought everyone into the schools, they stood by the door, under the rain, to protect all. They lighted fires to make sure everyone was warm and dry and all were fed. They did not just care for their own families, they cared for all. Many families are still thanking them for their services. They say if it were not for their help, they would not have survived. These acts of service were carried by the older junior youth and the graduates of the junior youth programme. When a child had to go to the toilet, they would take him or her outside, wait, and then return the child to the school. They did not care who the person was, they served all equally. The day after the cyclone, one of the junior youth told us that the cyclone has deepened the friends' understanding of the importance of caring for all.

The cyclone hit us during the Fast. Despite the cyclone and its devastating winds, the believers still fasted. A few days after the cyclone, we celebrated Naw-Rúz in our neighbourhoods with our friends. During the celebration we felt that our spirits were as high as ever—they had not been affected or discouraged by the cyclone. We celebrated Naw-Rúz with the utmost joy and happiness. During the celebration, the friends were encouraged to begin the reconstruction process immediately. We were encouraged to remain happy and content with God's Will. After Naw-Rúz every Bahá'í family began the reconstruction of their gardens and houses. On the day of Naw-Rúz we visited each other in what had remained of our houses.



The destroyed Bahá'í Centre in Namasmetene

From an animator of a junior youth group: Soon after the cyclone, my junior youth group came together to clean the roads. They were covered with broken trees. We have no doubt that we were saved through the prayers and the blessings we received through them. The junior youth helped the people reconstruct their houses and clean their yards. Some went to the Bahá'í Centre to salvage what was left.

The winds began blowing stronger during dawn. We knew we had to run to the school for refuge. But we said our dawn prayers first in preparation for the day of fasting before running to the school through the broken branches and flying objects. As we were saying our prayers, the roof of our house was being blown away. We were all determined to fast on that day. A few days after the cyclone, we celebrated Naw-Rúz in our neighbourhood with joy and happiness. We thank God that no one in our community died or was seriously hurt. The prayers truly saved us all. We really thank God for His help and blessings.

Launare

We visited a Bahá'í family in Launare. This elderly couple was pioneering for a number of years in Imapusine village. Their house was blown away during the cyclone, and they had to run to a house nearby that gave refuge to many others. In order to save the life of their few-month-old grandchild, they hid the baby in a suitcase and ran to another house for refuge. As we were departing, the family presented us with a gift. Despite the shortage of food, their generosity and love knew no bounds.



A Bahá'í family in Launare

While walking in the village we came across a Bahá'í family who were living in a little shed. All that was left of their house were the two walls made of bamboo. One of the walls is adorned with the Greatest Name and a photo of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.



Some of the friends in Imafin village

Imafin

We arrived in Imafin village, an area strongly affected by the cyclone. The Bahá'ís in this village faced fierce opposition from the inhabitants and chiefs of the village about 10 years ago. The Bahá'í Centre was confiscated, and the Bahá'ís were threatened to recant their faith. But they remained firm and patient until they regained their freedom to practise their faith.

While approaching the village we saw that it was almost completely destroyed. We finally arrived at the section of the village where most of the Bahá'ís resided and where

the Bahá'í Centre used to stand before the cyclone. The Bahá'í Centre and the houses of the people were nowhere to be found. When the friends saw us approaching them, they ran towards us calling aloud, “Alláh'u'Abhá, Alláh'u'Abhá”. An elderly Bahá'í woman could not stop repeating “Alláh'u'Abhá” and hugging us with tears in her eyes. It was truly a very emotional encounter. In no time we were surrounded by many believers, all greeting us with emotion and love. We were led to a shed, the only shade that could be found. The friends came one by one, until the shed was too small to accommodate all. We were then led to the house of one of the believers, which was the only house that had withstood the violent winds. They told us that this house had saved the lives of 157 people. The three rooms of the house were packed with people, each room taking turns praying while the winds were blowing. The friends shared with us their experience of the cyclone and how their houses, gardens, and belongings were lost within a matter of hours.



A view of Imafin village after the passing of the cyclone

From a mother in the village: When the winds were blowing, my six-year-old son, Furutan, called aloud, “Please, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, help us, our house is already gone, please make the winds to stop, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.” He would then pray and repeat “Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá” and the prayers that begin with “Is there any Remover of difficulties...” and “O God, guide me, protect me...”.

After the cyclone our Local Spiritual Assembly made a plan to celebrate Naw-Rúz. The chiefs and all the people of the village were invited to celebrate it with us. Many believers fasted during the cyclone, and the people at our Naw-Rúz celebration commented that next year they are going to join the Bahá'ís in fasting. We bought a bag of rice and killed a cow to celebrate Naw-Rúz. When the friends went to the river, they found a very large eel. We had never seen an eel in this river. We knew it was a gift from God. We caught the eel, cooked it, and shared it among the friends during Naw-Rúz. We are so happy that, despite the cyclone, we fasted, and we concluded our fasting with Naw-Rúz celebrations. We are confident that whatever we have lost to the cyclone we will regain through the blessings of Bahá'u'lláh. During the celebrations we shared with the people that soon we will restart the spiritual educational process in the village—the children's classes, the junior youth groups, and the study circles. Soon after the cyclone, the community helped cleaning the roads, replanting the gardens, and rebuilding houses. Tomorrow our Local Spiritual Assembly is going to meet again for making plans to start the educational process urgently. We have already put up a little shed that is serving as our temporary Bahá'í Centre in which the activities will be held.

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After meeting the friends one of us was approached by an elderly man who was 88 years old. He approached with the utmost humility and respect. He whispered that he wanted to contribute his Ḥuqúqu'lláh. He then gave a little plastic bag, in which was a handful of coins. As we were about to leave, the same elderly man insisted that he give a present to us to thank us for the visit: a chicken.



A payment of Ḥuqúqu'lláh



A local believer showing the picture of 'Abdu'l-Bahá which provided comfort during the cyclone

Ehniu

From a local believer: During the cyclone, I hid 'Abdu'l-Bahá's photo in a safe place so that the cyclone would not damage it. As the winds were getting stronger, I reached out for the photo, took it out, and hung it in the house again. When the winds reached their full strength, I took the photo in my hands, looked at 'Abdu'l-Bahá's eyes, and begged for protection. Throughout the cyclone, I held His photo in my hands while praying. I have no doubt it was divine protection that saved our lives.

Lowinio

From a local believer: When the cyclone came we were all fasting. We all went into one tiny room and began praying. We all took turns praying throughout the time the winds were blowing. The picture of 'Abdu'l-Bahá was hanging in the room, and we knew He was with us. During this time we were all confident that Bahá'u'lláh would save our lives. When the cyclone passed, we came out and saw the devastation it had left behind. The houses and the gardens were all gone.

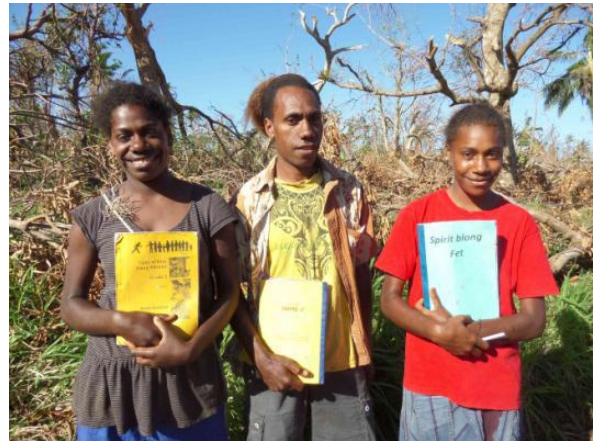


Some believers in Ehniu

After a number of days we made our plans to celebrate Naw-Rúz. We bought three bags of rice, and one of the friends donated a large pig. We invited everyone in the village to join us for Naw-Rúz. We went to where the Bahá'í Centre used to stand, cleaned the place, and celebrated Naw-Rúz. The place was packed with people. We sang and we danced the whole day and night. It was a very special day.

Isla

As we were approaching Isla village, we saw three Bahá'í youth from Isla walking in the opposite direction under strong sun. We asked where they were going, and they said they were going to a nearby village to conduct their children's classes and junior youth groups. Later in the village, we saw that their houses were destroyed and still unbuilt.



Core activities continue unabated

Tumah Mine

From three local friends: Our houses were being blown away one by one. We decided to take refuge at the school in the next village. We had to walk for about one kilometre. It was going to be a very dangerous walk as many large trees and branches were falling, and objects were flying everywhere. I prayed and asked Bahá'u'lláh to please protect us, especially our children. Sometimes we had to run, sometimes we crawled, and other times we lay flat. We were confident that we would be protected as we knew that Bahá'u'lláh was with us all the time. We finally arrived at the school. All were safe. As we were going towards the school, our full thoughts and heart were with Bahá'u'lláh. When we shared our experience with the friends who had already taken refuge at the school, they all cried.



Children in Tumah Mine

My husband and I woke up before dawn to say our prayers and have our breakfast in preparation for fasting. The winds were getting stronger and stronger. When the cyclone came closer, I placed my most cherished possessions in my bag—my prayer book and an institute book—and with my children we ran towards the school for refuge. I ensured that my prayer book was not going to get wet. The winds were very strong. It was a very dangerous walk. Some were almost blown away, some were almost hit by falling trees.

A few days after the cyclone, we planned to celebrate Naw-Rúz. We could not use the Bahá'í Centre as it was completely destroyed. We erected a small shelter for the celebration. One of the friends donated a pig, and we got some rice. We celebrated Naw-Rúz with our friends and neighbours in the village. We explained that fasting is one of the laws of Bahá'u'lláh and its observance attracts divine blessings. During Naw-Rúz the friends shared their fasting experience. We were all very happy to celebrate Naw-Rúz together.

Before the cyclone, my junior youth group had many service projects. They cleaned the village's water source and planted nut trees. After the cyclone, the junior youth helped the elderly and the widows by helping build their houses. They have already built four houses. Today we are planning to build another house. We will also be cleaning the water source for the people to use. Our other service projects are all destroyed, but we will restart them again as soon as the group meets. We will replant the nut trees as well.



The damage in Tumah Mine village

Isangel

From a local believer: After the cyclone, I decided, after consulting with a member of the National Spiritual Assembly, to offer my volunteer services at the Provincial Government Headquarter's Disaster Management Office. We had to organize the Disaster Management Office to respond effectively to the needs of the people by distributing the relief that was being donated by aid organizations. The Office had to collect statistics to be able to effectively distribute the relief supplies. We used the tools and instruments I had learned about while serving as a coordinator. We divided Tanna into sectors and collected statistics according to infants, children, junior youth, and adults. We also introduced the Bahá'í principles of consultation, action, and reflection. The member of the National Assembly and I manage the Bahá'í Desk in the Office. Many aid organizations approach us when they encounter an obstacle. We suggest to them to work with the chiefs and consult with the people at the grassroots.

We also suggested that the Office begin its operation every morning with prayers. There are eight sections in the Office. Initially they did not know how to consult, and it was hard to move forward. When we explained to them the importance of consultation and reflection and the principles that need to be upheld by the people consulting, this helped the operation to begin moving forward. There are about 15 different aid organizations from many parts of the world, and the Bahá'í Desk has helped connect these organizations. They often approach us to understand what is happening and how they can help.

The principles of the Faith, the tools we have learned to use through the process of expansion and consolidation, and our familiarity with Tanna have been helping the relief process a lot. The qualities we have gained over the years and the capacities we have developed while serving the Cause has truly helped us in dealing with the aftermath of the cyclone. For example, being able to read the reality of a situation, collecting statistics, planning, consulting, reflecting, being systematic, report writing, all these have been instrumental in the effectiveness of the relief operation for the first two weeks after the cyclone. We have consultations every morning and reflections every afternoon.



Some of the Bahá'ís in Ragatne village

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¹ Ridván 2014 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.

² Ibid.

³ Message dated 18 December 2014 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís in Iran.